

Perry, Cain and Paul and the Future of American Foreign Policy

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Thus far, foreign policy has not been a big part of the U.S. presidential campaign. President Obama has built a record of some impressive foreign policy accomplishments, beginning with the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden, but has generally pursued an unremarkable foreign policy distinguished by more continuity with regards to his predecessor than many on both sides of the political aisle care to admit. Obama's likely Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, has begun to portray himself as foreign policy hawk, criticizing Obama's Israel policy and making transparently meaningless pledges to restore America to greatness.

To a significant extent, the more interesting foreign policy developments in the election do not have much to do with either of the two men who are likely to be there party's nominees. These developments may also have more bearing on 2016 than 2012. Nonetheless, at least three Republican candidates, Ron Paul, Rick Perry and Herman Cain have made statements, or taken positions on foreign policy that could prove important harbingers of the future of the foreign policy debate in the U.S.

None of these candidates have a chance to win and all seem better fitted for a political satire improv troupe than for the highest elected office in the U.S., but their views on foreign policy should not be dismissed outright. Paul's longstanding Libertarian isolationism, Perry's questioning of the entire foreign assistance framework, and Cain's principled ignorance on any foreign policy questions are not going to help them get elected in 2012, but these views represent important trends in the American electorate.

For years, Paul's views of foreign policy have made him stand out in the Republican Party, at least among national Republican political figures, but that is now beginning to change. Perry's proposal to revamp foreign assistance by starting with having every country "come in at zero and make your case," is a radical departure from how foreign policy is currently delivered. It is the kind of proposal, particularly coming only a few days after Perry's embarrassing inability to remember which three federal agencies he wanted to abolish, that foreign policy insiders, and people who understand how government works, reflexively dismiss. However, it also resonates with many voters who think that the idea that country's should make clear arguments before receiving millions of dollars in foreign assistance is not such a bad notion. Nobody is taking Perry seriously anymore, but it not hard to imagine that in 2016, this idea will reemerge in a different form and with a more presentable messenger.

Cain's ignorance of the world outside the U.S. has become one of the pillars of his campaign. While it is easy to laugh at the man as he expresses concern that China might get nuclear weapons, demonstrates his complete lack of knowledge of the current situation in Libya or makes fun of the pronunciation of Central Asian dictatorships, this ignorance is reflective of an

electorate that is, at least in part, increasingly puzzled with the U.S. role in the world. Cain's promise to not know or care about the world beyond the U.S., is part of what makes him appealing to Americans who are angry, confused and frustrated, and not without reason, by the current state of American relations with the rest of the world.

Paul, Perry and Cain will likely end up as footnotes to a presidential campaign that seems headed towards being a very close race between Obama and Romney. These three will be remembered for a few years because of their scandals and gaffes, but even by 2016 it is unlikely any of them will be major political forces. While these candidates may disappear from the public stage, their views on foreign policy could play a substantial role in 2016.

There is a constituency in both parties that share Perry's desire to rethink and reduce foreign assistance and Cain's frustration with a world where the U.S. rarely seems to get it right on foreign policy and where problems in far away parts of the planet do not seem to go away. Both major party nominees in 2012 are firmly in the mainstream of the foreign policy elite, but this could change in 2016 with enormous implications for the U.S. and the world.